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(54) Title: EXPRESSION OF RECOMBINANT 18/16.6 AND 15.2 kD PROTEIN ANTIGENS OF <i>MYCOBACTERIUM LEPRAE</i> (57) Abstract DNA sequences encoding <i>Mycobacterium leprae</i> -specific antigens are disclosed. These polypeptides are useful in diagnosis of leprosy by immunoassay and in vaccines for prevention of the disease.		

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TITLE

Expression of Recombinant 18/16.6 and 15.2 kD
Protein Antigens of Mycobacterium leprae

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Leprosy is a chronic infectious disease caused by the acid-fast bacillus Mycobacterium leprae which exhibits a spectrum of clinical manifestations between extreme lepromatous and tuberculoid forms. The disease afflicts from 10 to 15 million people worldwide and is a major health problem in many tropical and sub-tropical areas.

Although leprosy can be treated with chemotherapy, successful control of the disease will ultimately depend upon effective vaccination. As M. leprae is an obligate intracellular parasite, vaccination procedures must be directed preferentially towards stimulation of cell-mediated responses. Initial results using a vaccine comprised of a mixture of armadillo-derived, killed M. leprae organisms and M. bovis BCG (bacillus Calmette-Guerin) have shown promise, and more extensive preventative trials are now underway using this combination. Unfortunately, it is questionable whether such vaccines, should they prove efficacious, would be inexpensive or plentiful enough to permit widespread use. The development of recombinant vaccines offers a potential solution to this problem.

Recently, Young et al. (Nature 316:450, 1985) constructed a random library of M. leprae DNA sequences in the λ gt11 bacteriophage expression vector and, using a panel of monoclonal antibodies directed against antigenic proteins and glycoproteins of M. leprae, were able to isolate recombinant clones expressing antigenic epitopes of the five most immunogenic M. leprae protein antigens. The sequence of one such antigen, termed the 65 kilodalton (kDa) antigen, is disclosed in PCT application US 87/01825, filed July 28, 1987. Crude lysate material from those recombinants which expressed an epitope of an 18 kilodalton (kDa) M. leprae protein was found to stimulate proliferation in culture of some M. leprae-specific human T cell clones produced from M. leprae-vaccinated volunteers (Mustafa et al., Nature 319:63, 1986). Most of the antigenic proteins of M. leprae exhibit immunological cross-reactivity at the level of antibodies with proteins from other mycobacteria. Significantly, however, the 18 kDa

protein appears to include at least one epitope specific for M. leprae, as shown by binding to a monoclonal antibody designated L5 (Britton et al., J. Immunol. 135:4171, 1986).

The 18 kDa protein is likely, therefore, to contain peptide fragments of potential importance as vaccine candidates near, or coincident with, the epitope recognized by the monoclonal antibody. The present invention is based upon the isolation and sequencing of a full length gene encoding the M. leprae 18 kDa protein from an M. leprae genomic library. The predicted molecular weight of the 18 kDa protein, based upon its apparent amino acid sequence, is actually 16.6 kDa. During screening of the λ gt11 library described by Young et al., supra, it was determined that this library lacked the complete sequence of the 18 kDa antigen due to an unexpected cleavage by a restriction endonuclease during preparation of the library. Accordingly, an additional source of M. leprae DNA was screened to secure the complete sequence, which was determined as set forth in the accompanying specification.

In the course of this work, a second open reading frame was discovered downstream from that encoding the 18/16.6 kDa antigen. This sequence apparently encodes a 15.2 kDa polypeptide representing a potential M. leprae antigen. Expression of these sequences in recombinant systems can provide substantial quantities of M. leprae-specific antigen at a reasonable cost for use in diagnosis or treatment. In addition, knowledge of the amino acid sequence of these polypeptides provides a basis for determining whether they contain any peptide regions likely to be good epitopes for helper T cell stimulation. As there is increasing evidence for suppressor T cell involvement in leprosy, it will be vital to discover whether particular domains of M. leprae-specific proteins, for example, the 18/16.6 kDa protein, can be identified that are capable of immunizing M. leprae-specific T helper cells as opposed to suppressor cells.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides recombinant expression vectors comprising DNA sequences encoding polypeptides which are substantially identical to the 18/16.6 kDa and 15.2 kDa protein antigens of Mycobacterium leprae, and substantially homogeneous protein

compositions consisting essentially of these polypeptides. These polypeptides, and immunologically effective subunits thereof, are useful immunoassay reagents for diagnosis of leprosy, and are also potentially useful as immunogenic components of vaccines.

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Prior to the present invention, the DNA sequences of the 18/16.6 kDa and 15.2 kDa protein antigens disclosed herein were unknown. Although others had prepared DNA libraries comprising such sequences, and the 18/16.6 kDa protein had actually been expressed in lysates of E. coli infected with λ gt11 bacteriophage, the expression products thus provided were actually fusion proteins having extensive E. coli β -galactosidase domains. For use as immunoassay reagents or for use in vaccines, substantial quantities of highly purified antigen are desirable. To ensure effectiveness in diagnosis or vaccination, expression of recombinant antigens without an extensive foreign protein portion is preferable.

Recombinant clones expressing antigenic determinants of the 18/16.6 kDa protein antigen from M. leprae which is recognized by the L5 monoclonal antibody (Mustafa et al., Nature 319:63, 1986) were isolated and sequenced. All clones expressed the M. leprae-specific determinant as part of a large fusion protein having an E. coli β -galactosidase fragment. The deduced amino acid sequence of the coding region indicated that the λ gt11 recombinant clones contained an incomplete M. leprae gene sequence representing the carboxy-terminal two-thirds (111 amino acids) of the 18 kDa gene and coding for a peptide of molecular weight 12,432 daltons (Da). Subsequent isolation and sequencing of a 3.2 kb BamHI-PstI DNA fragment from a genomic M. leprae cosmid library permitted the the complete 148 amino acid sequence to be determined. This sequence encoded a polypeptide having a predicted molecular weight of 16,607 Da. Accordingly, it will hereinafter be referred to as the "18/16.6 kDa" antigen. The residues providing the epitope recognized by antibody L5 are found in the sequence of amino acids 101-116 depicted in Table 1, particularly residues 109-114.

A second open reading frame 560 bases downstream (3' with respect to the first open reading frame described above) was found to

code for a putative protein of 137 amino acids having a predicted molecular weight of 15,196 Da. Neither this protein nor the 18/16.6 kDa amino acid sequence displayed any significant homologies with any proteins listed in the GENBANK, EMBL or NBRF databases.

5

Definitions

"18/16.6 and 15.2 kDa protein antigens of Mycobacterium leprae" refer to proteins expressed by pathogenic strains of M. leprae having the amino acid sequences which are predicted from the
10 nucleotide sequences depicted in Figures 1 and 2. "Immunologically effective subunit" means a peptide sequence of sufficient length to provide an epitope capable of recognition by antibody.

"Substantially identical", when used to define amino acid sequences, means that a particular subject sequence, for example, a
15 mutant sequence, varies from a reference sequence by one or more substitutions, deletions, or additions, the net effect of which does not result in an adverse functional dissimilarity between reference and subject sequences. For purposes of the present invention, amino acid sequences having greater than 80 percent identity are considered
20 to be substantially identical. In defining nucleic acid sequences, all subject nucleic acid sequences capable of encoding substantially identical amino acid sequences are considered substantially identical to a reference nucleic acid sequence. For purposes of determining
25 substantial identity, truncations or internal deletions of the reference sequence should be disregarded. Sequences having lesser degrees of similarity, comparable biological activity, and equivalent expression characteristics are considered to be equivalents.

"Substantially homogeneous protein composition" refers to a preparation consisting essentially of a selected polypeptide antigen
30 of M. leprae which is free of detectable quantities of other M. leprae proteins. Such compositions are conveniently provided as a product of recombinant microbial expression systems, for example, bacteria or yeast.

"DNA sequence" refers to a DNA polymer, in the form of a
35 separate fragment or as a component of a larger DNA construct, which has been derived from DNA isolated at least once in substantially pure form, i.e., free of contaminating endogenous materials and in a

quantity or concentration enabling identification, manipulation, and recovery of the sequence and its component nucleotide sequences by standard biochemical methods, for example, using a cloning vector. Sequences of non-translated DNA may be present 5' or 3' from the open
5 reading frame, where the same do not interfere with manipulation or expression of the coding regions.

"Nucleotide sequence" refers to a heteropolymer of deoxyribonucleotides. DNA sequences encoding the proteins provided by this invention can be assembled from cDNA fragments and short
10 oligonucleotide linkers, or from a series of oligonucleotides, to provide a synthetic gene which is capable of being expressed in a recombinant transcriptional unit.

"Recombinant expression vector" refers to a plasmid comprising a transcriptional unit comprising an assembly of (1) a
15 genetic element or elements having a regulatory role in gene expression, for example, promoters or enhancers, (2) a structural or coding sequence which is transcribed into mRNA and translated into protein, and (3) appropriate transcription and translation initiation and termination sequences. Structural elements intended for use in
20 yeast expression systems preferably include a leader sequence enabling extracellular secretion of translated protein by a host cell. Alternatively, where recombinant protein is expressed without a leader or transport sequence, it may include an N-terminal methionine residue. This residue may optionally be subsequently cleaved from the
25 expressed recombinant protein to provide a final product.

"Recombinant microbial expression system" means a substantially homogeneous monoculture of suitable host microorganisms, for example, bacteria such as E. coli or yeast such as S. cerevisiae, which have stably integrated a recombinant transcriptional unit into
30 chromosomal DNA or carry the recombinant transcriptional unit as a component of a resident plasmid. Generally, cells constituting the system are the progeny of a single ancestral transformant. Recombinant expression systems as defined herein will express heterologous protein upon induction of the regulatory elements linked
35 to the DNA sequence or synthetic gene to be expressed.

Appropriate cloning and expression vectors for use with bacterial and fungal hosts are described by Pouwels et al. (Cloning

Vectors: A Laboratory Manual, Elsevier, New York, 1985), the relevant disclosure of which is hereby incorporated by reference.

Useful expression vectors for bacterial use can be constructed by inserting a DNA sequence encoding a selected polypeptide together with suitable translation initiation and termination signals in operable reading phase with a functional promoter. The vector will comprise one or more phenotypic selectable markers and an origin of replication to ensure amplification within the host. Suitable prokaryotic hosts for transformation include E. coli, Bacillus subtilis, Salmonella typhimurium, and various species within the genera Pseudomonas, Streptomyces, and Staphylococcus, although others may also be employed as a matter of choice.

Expression vectors are conveniently constructed by cleavage of cDNA clones at sites close to the codon encoding the N-terminal residue of the mature protein. Synthetic oligonucleotides can then be used to "add back" any deleted sections of the coding region and provide a linking sequence for ligation of the coding fragment in appropriate reading frame in the expression vector, and optionally a codon specifying an initiator methionine.

Useful expression vectors for bacterial use can comprise a selectable marker and bacterial origin of replication derived from commercially available plasmids comprising genetic elements of the well known cloning vector pBR322 (ATCC 37017). Such commercial vectors include, for example, pKK223-3 (Pharmacia Fine Chemicals, Uppsala, Sweden) and pGEM1 (Promega Biotec, Madison, WI, USA). These pBR322 "backbone" sections are combined with an appropriate promoter and the structural sequence to be expressed.

One useful bacterial expression system employs the phage λ P_L promoter and cI857 thermolabile repressor. Plasmid vectors available from the American Type Culture Collection which incorporate derivatives of the λ P_L promoter include plasmid pHUB2, resident in E. coli strain JMB9 (ATCC 37092) and pPLc28, resident in E. coli RR1 (ATCC 53082). Other useful promoters for expression in E. coli include the T7 RNA polymerase promoter described by Studier et al. (J. Mol. Biol. 189: 113, 1986), the lacZ promoter described by Lauer (J. Mol. Appl. Genet. 1:139-147, 1981) and available as ATCC 37121, and the tac promoter described by Maniatis (Molecular Cloning: A

Laboratory Manual, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, 1982, p 412) and available as ATCC 37138.

Following transformation of a suitable host strain and growth of the host strain to an appropriate cell density, the selected promoter is derepressed by appropriate means (e.g., temperature shift or chemical induction) and cells cultured for an additional period. Cells are typically harvested by centrifugation, disrupted by physical or chemical means, and the resulting crude extract retained for further purification. Cells are grown, for example, in a 10 liter fermenter employing conditions of maximum aeration and vigorous agitation. An antifoaming agent (Antifoam A) is preferably employed. Cultures are grown at 30°C in the superinduction medium disclosed by Mott et al. (Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA 82:88, 1985), optionally including antibiotics, derepressed at a cell density corresponding to $A_{600} = 0.4-0.5$ by elevating the temperature to 42°C, and harvested from 2-20, preferably 3-6, hours after the upward temperature shift. The cell mass is initially concentrated by filtration or other means, then centrifuged at 10,000 x g for 10 minutes at 4°C followed by rapidly freezing the cell pellet.

Yeast systems, preferably employing Saccharomyces species such as S. cerevisiae, can also be employed for expression of the recombinant proteins of this invention. Yeast of other genera, for example, Pichia or Kluyveromyces, have also been employed as production strains for recombinant proteins.

Generally, useful yeast vectors will include origins of replication and selectable markers permitting transformation of both yeast and E. coli, e.g., the ampicillin resistance gene of E. coli and S. cerevisiae TRP1 gene, and a promoter derived from a highly-expressed yeast gene to induce transcription of a downstream structural sequence. Such promoters can be derived from yeast transcriptional units encoding highly expressed gene such as 3-phosphoglycerate kinase (PGK), α -factor, acid phosphatase, or heat shock proteins, among others. The heterologous structural sequence is assembled in appropriate reading frame with translation initiation and termination sequences, and, preferably, a leader sequence capable of directing secretion of translated protein into the extracellular medium. Optionally, the heterologous sequence can encode a fusion

protein including an N-terminal identification peptide (e.g., Asp-Tyr-Lys-(Asp)₄-Lys) or other sequence imparting desired characteristics, e.g., stabilization or simplified purification of expressed recombinant product.

5 Useful yeast vectors can be assembled using DNA sequences from pBR322 for selection and replication in E. coli (Amp^r gene and origin of replication) and yeast DNA sequences including a glucose-repressible alcohol dehydrogenase 2 (ADH2) promoter. The ADH2 promoter has been described by Russell et al. (J. Biol. Chem.
10 258:2674, 1982), and Beier et al. (Nature 300:724, 1982). Such vectors may also include a yeast TRP1 gene as a selectable marker and the yeast 2 μ origin of replication. A yeast leader sequence, for example, the α -factor leader which directs secretion of heterologous proteins from a yeast host, can be inserted between the promoter and
15 the structural gene to be expressed (see Kurjan et al., U.S. Patent 4,546,082; Kurjan et al., Cell 30:933 (1982); and Bitter et al., Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA 81:5330, 1984). The leader sequence may be modified to contain, near its 3' end, one or more useful restriction sites to facilitate fusion of the leader sequence to foreign genes.

20 Suitable yeast transformation protocols are known to those skilled in the art; an exemplary technique is described by Hinnen et al. (Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA 75:1929, 1978), selecting for Trp⁺ transformants in a selective medium consisting of 0.67% yeast nitrogen base, 0.5% casamino acids, 2% glucose, 10 μ g/ml adenine and 20 μ g/ml
25 uracil.

 Host strains transformed by vectors comprising the ADH2 promoter may be grown for expression in a rich medium consisting of 1% yeast extract, 2% peptone, and 1% glucose supplemented with 80 μ g/ml adenine and 80 μ g/ml uracil. Derepression of the ADH2 promoter occurs
30 upon exhaustion of medium glucose. Crude yeast supernatants are harvested by filtration and held at 4°C prior to further purification.

 Recombinant proteins can be purified from crude extracts or crude fermentates by various conventional chromatographic methods, optionally following concentration by ultrafiltration or precipitation
35 with ammonium sulfate. Chromatography can be by size-exclusion, ion-exchange, or affinity chromatography using a specific antibody conjugated to a solid phase. Finally, one or more reversed-phase high

performance liquid chromatography (RP-HPLC) steps employing hydrophobic RP-HPLC media, e.g., silica gel having pendant methyl or other aliphatic groups, can be employed to further purify the recombinant protein.

5 In one embodiment of the present invention, the amino acid sequence of an M. leprae antigen is linked to a yeast α -factor leader sequence or bacterial signal sequence via an N-terminal fusion construct comprising a nucleotide encoding the peptide Asp-Tyr-Lys-Asp-Asp-Asp-Asp-Lys (DYKDDDDK). The latter sequence is highly
10 antigenic and provides an epitope reversibly bound by specific monoclonal antibody (4E11, ATCC HB-9259), enabling rapid assay and facile purification of expressed recombinant protein. This sequence is also specifically cleaved by bovine mucosal enterokinase at the residue immediately following the Asp-Lys pairing. Fusion proteins
15 capped with this peptide may also be resistant to intracellular degradation in E. coli. The presence of the DYKDDDDK epitope in fusion proteins comprising other domains recognized by M. leprae-specific antibody also permits the fusion proteins to be used in two-site immunoassays.

20

Utility

The protein antigens provided by the present invention represent useful components of diagnostic immunoassays for antibodies specific to M. leprae. Methods of conducting such assays are well
25 known to those of skill in the art. One useful method is an indirect two-site immunoassay, also known as an "antibody sandwich" assay. In this method, a purified antibody ("first antibody") which specifically recognizes an epitope present on the antigen to be employed is nonspecifically bound to a solid phase support, for example, a plastic
30 microtiter dish or plastic tube. This preparation is then reacted with purified antigen to provide a complex of antigen and first antibody bound to the solid phase, and excess antigen is removed by decanting and washing. Various dilutions of samples (for example, human sera) to be tested for the presence of antibody specific for the
35 antigen ("second antibody") are then reacted with the antigen-first antibody complex. Excess sample is removed, and the presence of second antibody bound to the complex is detected using reagents

specific for human IgG. Such reagents include, for example, rabbit or goat anti-human IgG polyclonal antibodies conjugated to a suitable enzymatic or radiometric reporter group, for example, alkaline phosphatase, horseradish peroxidase, or ^{125}I . The presence of the reporter group is then detected by appropriate means.

Various technologies applicable to the design of immunoassays are described by Hales et al., Methods Enzymol. 70:334 (1980) and the references cited therein. Reagents and supplies employed in such assays are widely commercially available.

The protein antigens and peptide subunits of the present invention are also suitable for use as vaccines. The vaccines can comprise the entire polypeptide encoded by the nucleotide sequences set forth in Figures 1 and 2, substantially identical proteins, or immunogenic fragments of the larger polypeptides. Preferably, immunogenic fragments or protein analogs are employed which are capable of immunizing M. leprae-specific T helper cells without activating suppressor cells, thereby avoiding M. leprae-induced immunosuppression observed in lepromatous patients.

Where immunogenic fragments are employed which have molecular weights less than 1000 daltons, antigenicity can be improved by covalent attachment of the fragments, or haptens, to carrier proteins or synthetic polypeptides to provide conjugate immunogens. Suitable carrier proteins include globulin fractions, the serum albumins of various species, hemocyanin, ovalbumin, lactalbumin, thyroglobulin, and fibrinogen. The number of haptens bound to the carrier protein can vary from 2 to 50, depending upon the conditions of conjugation. Preferably, a given carrier has, on average, at least five peptide haptens covalently attached. Generally, higher antibody titers are obtained using conjugates having higher epitope densities.

Peptides are linked to carrier proteins with a spacer group or crosslinker, of which many suitable examples are known in the art. Among these techniques are the mixed anhydride procedures disclosed by Vaughn et al., J. Am. Chem. Soc. 74:676 (1952), and Karol et al., Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA 57:713 (1967). Alternative conjugation reagents include carbodiimide reagents, for example, 1-ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl)carbodiimide-HCl, (EDAC), or 1-cyclohexyl-3-[2-morpholinyl-(4)ethyl]carbodiimide metho-p-toluenesulfate.

References disclosing suitable procedures useful in conjugating peptides to proteins by carbodiimide methods include Bauminger et al., Methods in Enzymology 70:151 (1980); Goodfriend et al., Science 143:1344 (1964), and Jaffe et al., Immunochem. 7:715 (1970).

- 5 Carbodiimide coupling reagents are commercially available (Biorad Laboratories, Richmond, California, USA) and product literature discloses applicable techniques for use. Peptides can be coupled to carrier proteins by conversion of haptenic amino groups to p-nitrobenzoylamide by reaction with p-nitrobenzyl chloride. The
- 10 amide derivative is then reduced to a p-aminobenzoyl derivative which can be coupled to proteins by diazotization. References disclosing such conjugation chemistries include Anderer, Biochim. Biophys. Acta 71:246 (1963) and Deodhar, J. Exp. Med. 111:419, 429 (1960). Alternatively, amino-amino conjugations can be effected using
- 15 glutaraldehyde as a coupling reagent, for example, as disclosed by Reichlin, Methods in Enzymology 70:159 (1980). Alternatively, disulfide bonds between a cysteine residue in the coupling region of the hapten and a second cysteine residue in the carrier protein can be formed using m-maleimidobenzoyl-N-hydroxy succinimide ester (MBS).
- 20 This reagent can be reacted with free thiol groups on either peptide or carrier protein, to provide an MBS-acylated intermediate which is then reacted with the other component to provide a conjugate. A suitable technique for use of MBS is disclosed by Kitagawa et al., J. Biochem. 94:1165 (1983). Following conjugation, unreacted materials
- 25 are separated from the conjugated immunogen by extensive dialysis or gel filtration.

- To administer the vaccines, compositions can be prepared which comprise a physiologically acceptable carrier or diluent, for example phosphate-buffered saline. To potentiate the antibody
- 30 response to immunization, such compositions can optionally comprise an adjuvant such as mineral oil, aluminum hydroxide, or a lymphokine such as interleukin-1 or interleukin-2. Immunization is preferably conducted by intramuscular injection of an initial dose of immunogen followed several weeks later by a booster. An initial inoculation can
- 35 consist of from 0.01-1 mg of antigen or conjugate, followed by a booster of approximately half the initial dose.

Example 1: Cloning and Sequencing of 18/16.6 and 15.2 kDa Antigens

Approximately 10^6 bacteriophage plaques (10^5 recombinant plaques) from a recombinant λ gt11 library were screened for expression of an epitope of the M. leprae 18/16.6 kDa protein using a monoclonal antibody, L5, as described below. The recombinant M. leprae library was identical to that described by Young et al., Nature 316:450, 1985.

The monoclonal antibody L5 described by Britton et al. (J. Immunol. 135:4171, 1985) (formerly designated L7.15) recognizes a determinant on the 18/16.6 kDa M. leprae protein antigen and apparently does not cross-react with antigens of other Mycobacterial species. This antibody was prepared (as a gammaglobulin fraction) from ascites fluid at a concentration of 29 mg/ml. It was used at a final concentration of 145 μ g/ml in Tris-buffered saline (150 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0) containing 0.5% (v/v) Tween 20.

To screen the library, bacteriophage plaques were plated on E. coli Y1090(r⁻) (Promega Biotec, Madison, WI, USA), recombinant protein expression was induced by overlaying the plates with nitrocellulose filters impregnated with 10 mM isopropyl- β -D-thiogalactopyranoside (IPTG), and then proteins transferred to the filters were screened for the presence of an L5-binding epitope using the method described by Young et al. (Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA 82:2583, 1985). Biotinylated horse anti-mouse IgG (Vector Laboratories, San Diego, CA) and Vectastain ABC reagent (Vector Laboratories) or Streptavidin-biotin-horseradish peroxidase conjugate (Amersham International, Amersham, UK) were used as developing reagents.

Four recombinant clones were isolated and sequenced as follows. DNA from each clone was prepared and purified from lysates of induced lysogens as described by Maniatis (Molecular Cloning: A Laboratory Manual, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, New York, 1983) and digested with EcoRI. M. leprae insert DNA was isolated from 1.0% low melting agarose and subcloned into suitably-digested M13 mp series vectors (Messing, Meth. Enzymol. 101:20, 1983). M13 recombinant clones were sequenced by the dideoxy chain termination method of Sanger et al. (J. Mol. Biol. 143:161, 1980) on both complementary strands, and compressions were checked using gels containing 25% formamide. Sequence information was assembled and analyzed using a modified version of the computer program of Staden (Nucl. Acids Res.

10:4731, 1982).

Four additional clones were isolated by plaque DNA hybridization, using insert DNA from one of the recombinant λ gt11 clones as a probe. One of these clones subsequently was found to
5 express the M. leprae 18/16.6 kDa epitope. Although the clones were all of different lengths, the 5' end of all the sequences were identical to one another.

From the sequence overlap of the clones, it was clear that representation of the gene for the 18 kDa protein within the λ gt11
10 library is non-random, probably reflecting the presence of an EcoRI restriction site within the coding sequence in M. leprae DNA which, perhaps because of its surrounding secondary structure, was not adequately protected by methylation during library construction. Thus, it was apparent that the complete coding sequence for the
15 18/16.6 kDa protein was unlikely to be retrievable in a single clone (or in overlapping clones) from this particular library.

Accordingly, a cosmid library identical to that described by Clark-Curtiss, et al., (J. Bacteriol. 161:1093, 1985) containing partially PstI-digested M. leprae DNA, was screened by nucleic acid
20 hybridization using a 582 bp insert derived from one of the λ gt11 clones as a probe. A 3.2 kb BamHI-PstI fragment was isolated from the library, sequenced by colony hybridization techniques (Hanahan and Meselson, Meth. Enzymol. 100:333, 1983), and shown to contain identical sequences to those from the λ gt11 clone inserts. The
25 sequences of the two open reading frames found in this cosmid fragment are shown in Figures 1 and 2, together with their predicted amino acid sequences. The predicted molecular weight of the protein encoded by the first open reading frame is 16,607 Da. A 611 bp DdeI fragment (from position 467 to 1077 in Figure 3) containing the entire 18/16.6
30 kDa coding sequence was subcloned into the SmaI site of the E. coli expression vector pUC18. This construct, when transformed into a suitable host strain, constitutively expressed a single L5-binding molecule having an apparent molecular weight by SDS-PAGE of approximately 17 kDa.

35 When the complete nucleotide sequence of the 3.2 kb BamHI-PstI M. leprae fragment was scanned for non-random codon usage using the method disclosed by Fickett (Nucl. Acids Res. 10:5303,

1982), a second open reading frame was identified 560 bases downstream from the 18/16.6 kDa gene. The 137 amino acid sequence deduced from the first methionine residue of this reading frame had a predicted molecular weight of 15,196.

5 Because some M. leprae-specific helper T cell clones have been found to proliferate in response to λ gt11 recombinant material containing the carboxy-terminal 111 amino acids of the 18/16.6 kDa protein, the deduced amino acid sequence was analyzed to determine whether it contains any sequences likely to be good helper T cell
10 immunogens. Applying the algorithm of Margalit et al. (J. Immunol. 138:2213, 1987), five short peptides were discovered which were predicted to be able to form amphipathic helices. The most highly-ranked of these sequences is found in the amino-terminal region of the 18/16.6 kDa protein that is not present in material from the
15 λ gt11 clones. The size, amphipathicity score, and location of these sequences are set forth in the following table. In the table, amino acids are numbered in accordance with the sequence shown in Figure 1.

Table 1

20

Amphipathic Peptides from 18/16.6 kDa Protein

<u>Amino acid range</u>	<u>Peptide Size</u>	<u>Amphipathicity Score</u>
8-23	16-mer	37.2
131-148	18-mer	23.9
25 97-112	16-mer	14.6
26-40	15-mer	11.9
79-98	20-mer	6.4

30

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CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A recombinant expression vector comprising a DNA sequence encoding a polypeptide which is substantially identical to the 18/16.6 kDa and 15.2 kDa protein antigens of Mycobacterium leprae or an immunologically effective subunit thereof.
2. A recombinant expression vector according to Claim 1, comprising a DNA sequence as shown in Figure 1 or an immunologically effective subunit thereof.
3. A recombinant expression vector according to Claim 2, comprising a DNA sequence encoding a peptide subunit comprising all or an immunologically effective subunit of a sequence selected from the group consisting of amino acids 8-23, 131-148, 97-112, 26-40, or 79-98 as shown in Figure 1.
4. A recombinant expression vector according to Claim 2, comprising a DNA sequence encoding a peptide subunit comprising all or an immunologically effective subunit of amino acids 101-116 as shown in Figure 1.
5. A recombinant expression vector according to Claim 1, comprising a DNA sequence as shown in Figure 2 or an immunologically effective subunit thereof.
6. A substantially homogeneous protein composition consisting essentially of a polypeptide which is substantially identical to the 18/16.6 kDa and 15.2 kDa protein antigens of Mycobacterium leprae or an immunologically effective subunit thereof.
7. A composition according to Claim 6, consisting essentially of a polypeptide which is substantially identical to the 18/16.6 kDa protein antigen of Mycobacterium leprae or an immunologically effective subunit thereof.
8. A composition according to Claim 6, consisting essentially of a polypeptide which is substantially identical to the 15.2 kDa protein antigen of Mycobacterium leprae or an immunologically effective subunit thereof.
9. A peptide immunogen comprising all or an immunologically effective subunit of amino acids 101-116 as shown in Figure 1.
10. A peptide immunogen having an amino acid sequence which is substantially identical to a peptide subunit comprising all or an

immunologically effective subunit of a sequence selected from the group consisting of amino acids 8-23, 131-148, 97-112, 26-40, or 79-98 as shown in Figure 1.

11. A diagnostic immunoassay for the presence of antibody to Mycobacterium leprae, comprising (1) contacting a test sample in which antibody is to be detected with a polypeptide which is substantially identical to the 18/16.6 kDa and 15.2 kDa protein antigens of Mycobacterium leprae or an immunologically effective subunit thereof under conditions enabling formation of polypeptide-antibody complexes, (2) removing unbound components of the test sample, and (3) detecting the presence of polypeptide-antibody complexes using means capable of identifying the presence of bound antibody.

12. An immunoassay test kit comprising as one component thereof a polypeptide which is substantially identical to the 18/16.6 kDa or 15.2 kDa protein antigens of Mycobacterium leprae or an immunologically effective subunit thereof.

13. A vaccine composition comprising a polypeptide which is substantially identical to the 18/16.6 kDa and 15.2 kDa protein antigens of Mycobacterium leprae or an immunologically effective subunit thereof and a suitable diluent or carrier.

1/2

Figure 1: Sequence of 18/16.6 kDa Protein

ATG	CTG	ATG	CGT	ACT	GAC	CCG	TTC	CGT	GAA	CTG	GAC	CGC	TTC	GCC	45
Met	Leu	Met	Arg	Thr	Asp	Pro	Phe	Arg	Glu	Leu	Asp	Arg	Phe	Ala	15
GAG	CAA	GTG	TTA	GGT	ACG	TCT	GCC	CGC	CCA	GCA	GTA	ATG	CCC	ATG	90
Glu	Gln	Val	Leu	Gly	Thr	Ser	Ala	Arg	Pro	Ala	Val	Met	Pro	Met	30
GAC	GCT	TGG	CGT	GAG	GGC	GAA	GAA	TTC	GTC	GTC	GAG	TTC	GAC	CTT	135
Asp	Ala	Trp	Arg	Glu	Gly	Glu	Glu	Phe	Val	Val	Glu	Phe	Asp	Leu	45
CCT	GGC	ATC	AAA	GCC	GAT	TCA	CTG	GAC	ATT	GAC	ATC	GAA	CGC	AAC	180
Pro	Gly	Ile	Lys	Ala	Asp	Ser	Leu	Asp	Ile	Asp	Ile	Glu	Arg	Asn	60
GTA	GTC	ACC	GTG	CGG	GCC	GAG	CGC	CCA	GGC	GTC	GAC	CCC	GAT	CGG	225
Val	Val	Thr	Val	Arg	Ala	Glu	Arg	Pro	Gly	Val	Asp	Pro	Asp	Arg	75
GAA	ATG	CTT	GCT	GCC	GAG	CGG	CCA	CGC	GGT	GTG	TTC	AAT	CGT	CAG	270
Glu	Met	Leu	Ala	Ala	Glu	Arg	Pro	Arg	Gly	Val	Phe	Asn	Arg	Gln	90
CTG	GTT	CTC	GGC	GAA	AAC	CTC	GAC	ACC	GAA	CGG	ATC	TTG	GCT	TCC	315
Leu	Val	Leu	Gly	Glu	Asn	Leu	Asp	Thr	Glu	Arg	Ile	Leu	Ala	Ser	105
TAC	CAA	GAA	GGT	GTC	CTG	AAG	TTG	TCG	ATA	CCA	GTA	GCC	GAA	AGG	360
Tyr	Gln	Glu	Gly	Val	Leu	Lys	Leu	Ser	Ile	Pro	Val	Ala	Glu	Arg	120
GCT	AAA	CCG	CGC	AAG	ATC	TCC	GTT	GAT	CGT	GGC	AAC	AAC	GGA	CAC	405
Ala	Lys	Pro	Arg	Lys	Ile	Ser	Val	Asp	Arg	Gly	Asn	Asn	Gly	His	135
CAG	ACC	ATA	AAC	AAA	ACC	GCA	CAC	GAA	ATC	ATA	GAT	GCC			444
Gln	Thr	Ile	Asn	Lys	Thr	Ala	His	Glu	Ile	Ile	Asp	Ala			148

2/2

Figure 2: Sequence of 15.2 Kda Protein

ATG	TCG	TCC	CTA	ACT	ACC	GAC	CTG	ATG	CTC	ACC	CAC	AGG	CAC	CTC	45
Met	Ser	Ser	Leu	Thr	Thr	Asp	Leu	Met	Leu	Thr	His	Arg	His	Leu	15
AAC	GAC	CGC	GGT	CAA	GTA	GCG	GCC	ACC	ATT	GAC	GAA	ATC	CTG	AAC	90
Asn	Asp	Arg	Gly	Gln	Val	Ala	Ala	Thr	Ile	Asp	Glu	Ile	Leu	Asn	30
ACA	CAT	AAG	TTA	TTC	AGC	ACC	CGT	CAC	CGG	ATT	ATC	GAC	ACC	AGC	135
Thr	His	Lys	Leu	Phe	Ser	Thr	Arg	His	Arg	Ile	Ile	Asp	Thr	Ser	45
GAA	AAT	GTG	GAC	AAC	GTC	ATC	GTA	ATT	GCT	GAT	CAG	CTG	TTC	GAC	180
Glu	Asn	Val	Asp	Asn	Val	Ile	Val	Ile	Ala	Asp	Gln	Leu	Phe	Asp	60
GAC	CGA	GGA	GCA	ACG	ATC	GGA	ACG	TAT	GAT	TTC	TAC	ATC	GAT	GTT	225
Asp	Arg	Gly	Ala	Thr	Ile	Gly	Thr	Tyr	Asp	Phe	Tyr	Ile	Asp	Val	75
TCG	GCC	CTA	CCG	GAA	CAA	GTG	CAC	GAG	GGC	ATC	GTC	ATA	GCG	AGA	270
Ser	Ala	Leu	Pro	Glu	Gln	Cal	His	Glu	Gly	Ile	Val	Ile	Ala	Arg	90
CTA	GCC	AAG	AGC	ACC	CAA	AAC	CGA	GCG	GGA	ATC	GAG	CAG	ACC	AAG	315
Leu	Ala	Lys	Ser	Thr	Gln	Asn	Arg	Ala	Gly	Ile	Glu	Gln	Thr	Lys	105
AGC	ATG	TTG	ATG	CTG	ATC	GAT	GGT	ATA	ACC	TAC	GAC	ACC	CCG	TTC	360
Ser	Met	Leu	Met	Leu	Ile	Asp	Gly	Ile	Thr	Tyr	Asp	Thr	Pro	Phe	120
AAC	CTG	CTC	AAA	TAC	GCT	GTC	CCA	GGA	AAC	CAA	CAT	CAA	GCT	GCG	405
Asn	Leu	Leu	Lys	Tyr	Ala	Val	Pro	Gly	Asn	Gln	His	Gln	Ala	Ala	135
GCT	GGC														411
Ala	Gly														137

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International Application No. **PCT/US88/04659**

I. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER (if several classification symbols apply, indicate all) ¹		
According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both National Classification and IPC INT. CL. 4th Ed. CO7K 13/00; A61K 37/02; U.S. CL. 530/350; 424/88; 435/320,7		
II. FIELDS SEARCHED		
Minimum Documentation Searched ⁴		
Classification System	Classification Symbols	
US	530/350; 424/88; 435/320,7	
Documentation Searched other than Minimum Documentation to the Extent that such Documents are Included in the Fields Searched ⁵		
III. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT ¹⁶		
Category [*]	Citation of Document, ¹⁶ with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages ¹⁷	Relevant to Claim No. ¹⁸
X,P	The Journal of Immunology, Vol. 140, No. 2, Issued 15 January 1988 (Booth) "Antigenic Proteins of Mycobacterium Leprae Complete Sequence of the Gene for the 18-kDa Protein" Pages 597-601 (See summary).	1-13
X	The Journal of Immunology, Vol. 135, No. 6, Issued December 1985 (Warwick) "Mycobacterium Leprae Antigens Involved in Human Immune Responses". pages 4171-4177 (See summary).	1-13
X	The Journal of Infectious Diseases, Vol. 156, No. 5, Issued November 1987 (William) "Mycobacterial Carbohydrate Antigens for Serological Testing of Patients with Leprosy". pages 763-769 (See Summary).	1-13
X,P	Biological Abstract, Vol. 85, Issued 15 June 1988 (Britton) "Antigens of Mycobacterium Leprae identified by immunoprecipitation with sera from leprosy and tuberculosis patients" Abstract no. 122146	1-13
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 45%;"> <p>[*] Special categories of cited documents: ¹⁹</p> <p>"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance</p> <p>"E" earlier document but published on or after the international filing date</p> <p>"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)</p> <p>"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means</p> <p>"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed</p> </div> <div style="width: 45%;"> <p>"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention</p> <p>"X" document of particular relevance: the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step</p> <p>"Y" document of particular relevance: the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art.</p> <p>"&" document member of the same patent family</p> </div> </div>		
IV. CERTIFICATION		
Date of the Actual Completion of the International Search ²	Date of Mailing of this International Search Report ³	
21 March 1988	18 APR 1989	
International Searching Authority ¹	Signature of Authorized Officer ²⁰	
ISA/US	DELBERT R. PHILLIPS	

III. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT (CONTINUED FROM THE SECOND SHEET)		
Category *	Citation of Document, ¹ with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages ¹²	Relevant to Claim No. ¹³
X,P	Biological Abstract, Vol. 85, Issued 01 April 1988 (Ehrenberg) "Analysis of the Antigenic profile of Mycobacterium leprae: Cross-reactive and unique specificities of human and rabbit antibodies" Abstract no. 68474).	1-13
X,P	Biological Abstract, Vol. 85, Issued 01 February 1988 (Levis) "Mycobacterial carbohydrate antigens for serological testing of patient with leprosy" (Abstract no. 28156).	1-13
X,P	Chemical Abstract, Vol. 109, Issued 07 November 1988 (Columbus, OH.) "Identification of T-cell-activating recombinant antigens shared among three candidate anti-leprosy vaccines, killed M. Leprae M.bovis BCG and Mycobacterium w. ". Abstract no. 168510j	1-13
X,P	Chemical Abstract, Vol. 108, Issued 09 May 1988 (Columbus, OH.) "Antigens of Mycobacterium leprae identified by immunoprecipitation with sera from leprosy and tuberculosis patients" Abstract no. 165813d	1-13
X,P	Chemical Abstract, Vol. 109, Issued 05 December 1988 (Columbus, OH.) "The use of a 'universal' yeast expression vector to produce an antigenic protein of Mycobacterium leprae" (Booth) abstract no. 206177r	1-13
X,P	Biological Abstract, Vol. 87, Issued November 1988 (Booth) "The use of a universal yeast expression Vector To Produce An Antigenic Protein of Mycobacterium Leprae". abstract no. 16610	1-13